

Maxine Waters

1938–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

1991–



Image courtesy of the Member

ON THE “MY HERO” WEBSITE, A YOUNG WOMAN NAMED MICHELLE describes U.S. Representative Maxine Waters as a “Community Hero” and adds, “[Waters] instills the belief that you can achieve whatever you wish as long as you really strive to do so.”¹ In fact, over three decades, Congresswoman Waters has become one of the nation’s most tenacious, unapologetic advocates for women, children, the poor, economic development, communities of color, and both human and civil rights.

Waters’ passionate commitment to social and economic justice can be traced back to the struggles her family faced during her youth. Maxine Moore Carr was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on August 15, 1938, the fifth of 13 children in a family headed by a single mother. “I know all about welfare,” she once recalled. “I remember the social workers peeking in the refrigerator and under the beds.”² Although she has established a long list of significant achievements and is considered one of the most powerful women in American politics, she still carries with her the memories of starting work at age 13 in factories and segregated restaurants. Perhaps, it is her first-hand experience with those issues that has also made her one of the nation’s most effective grassroots organizers.

Waters moved to California in 1961 and, in 1970, earned a B.A. in sociology from California State University at Los Angeles. During that time, she launched her career in public service with the Head Start program, where she eventually became an administrator coordinating the Parent Involvement Program. In 1976, Waters was elected to the California state assembly where she became the first woman in state history elected by her peers to the leadership post of minority whip. She eventually became chair of the Democratic caucus. As an assemblywoman, she successfully spearheaded efforts to start: the first statewide child abuse prevention training program in the country; the largest divestment of state pension funds from South Africa; landmark affirmative action legislation; and the prohibition of police strip searches for individuals charged with nonviolent misdemeanors.

In 1990, Waters was elected to fill the congressional seat vacated by the retiring U.S. Representative Augustus “Gus” Hawkins, the first African American to represent California in the national legislature. She captured 79 percent of the vote and has never been seriously challenged since, capturing similar percentages in her seven subsequent re-election campaigns.³

As a Member of Congress, Waters’s legislative agenda has included: producing \$10 billion under the Section 108 loan guarantee program for economic and infrastructure development in U.S. cities; successfully tripling funding for debt relief in poor nations; obtaining \$50 million for the Youth Fair Chance Program; creating the “Center for Women Veterans”; and leading in the establishment of the Minority AIDS Initiative. Additionally, Waters has been a leader on global peace and international human right issues and remains actively involved in continued efforts to improve the plight of individuals oppressed in conflict-torn nations like Sudan, Haiti, and Liberia.

Waters’s efforts have not gone unnoticed by her congressional colleagues. In 1997, she won the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus and later, her Democratic colleagues elected her to the post of Chief Deputy Minority Whip. She serves on the influential House Committee on the Judiciary and the Committee on Financial Services, on which she is the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity.

By the 109th Congress (2005–2007), Representative Waters was a leading woman member of the Democratic Party. She acquired that status, as an observer noted, by amplifying her record of advocacy at the local and state level to become “a community activist in Congress.”⁴ In 2005, Waters co-founded and was elected chair of the 72-member “Out of Iraq” Congressional Caucus. One of the largest caucuses in the House of Representatives, it was established to provide consistent pressure on the George W. Bush administration, to provide a voice in Congress for the individuals and organizations opposed to the Iraq War, and, ultimately, to end the war and reunite U.S. troops with their families as soon as possible.

One of the things which Waters prizes most is her family. She is married to Sidney Williams, the former U.S. Ambassador to the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. She is the mother of two adult children, Karen and Edward, and has two grandchildren.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, “Maxine Waters,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

Naden, Corinne J., and Rose Blue. *Heroes Don't Just Happen: Biographies of Overcoming Bias and Building Character in Politics* (Maywood, NJ: Peoples Pub. Group, 1997).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

California State Archives
(Sacramento, CA). *Papers*: 1979–1990, 30 cubic feet. In Maxine Waters’s bill files.

Papers: In miscellaneous office files of Maxine Waters, 1978–1982, 11 cubic feet. Includes schedules and itineraries, ways and means committee records, budget conference, and elections and reapportionment committee working papers. Also includes judiciary committee correspondence on pending legislation.

Papers: In subject files of Assemblywoman Waters, 1977–1986, unknown amount of material. Includes documentation on the Commission on Status of Women. Restricted access.

NOTES

1 “Community Hero: Maxine Waters,” http://myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=WATERS_TAFT_04 (accessed 21 July 2006).

2 *Almanac of American Politics*, 2006, (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2005): 261.

3 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.

4 John L. Mitchell, “Undeterred Waters Crusades for Answers,” 4 March 1997, *Los Angeles Times*: A3.